

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

PEGGY ANN BROWN

Interviewed by: Monique Wong

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Q: This is Sunday, October 25th, 1992. This is Monique Wong. I'm interviewing Mrs. Peggy Ann Brown at her home for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History program.

Mrs. Brown, thank you very much for letting me come by to interview you for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History program. First of all I thought I would ask you about the Foreign Service Reserve. I understand that your husband came into the Foreign Service under something called the Foreign Service Reserve. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

BROWN: He did that, I think, in the year 1945, because before the war he had been a partner in a New York law firm. And then the war came and he wanted to do something in the war. So he was told by a friend or friends about an opportunity to serve the government in the State Department on what was being set up as the Lend Lease program then. His first boss at that time was a man named Oscar Cox whom I never met. So he came down and was offered a job. "Yes, please come and help us." And he came down to Washington. How long he was here before going to England I just don't know, but he went to England very early on in the war to help set up the Lend Lease Program.

Q: That was in Geneva?

BROWN: No, in London. And Governor Harriman came to London to be in charge of the program shortly after. I would say offhand that was 1940 or '41. I know in all he was in London for four and a half years during the war in the embassy which is, as I told you, where we met. Because I was in the American Red Cross and we met at a dinner.

Q: So you met in London?

BROWN: We met in London, yes. Through a mutual friend we met at a dinner. We began a courtship, I guess is the only word you can call it, which was very difficult because he stayed on in London and I was sent to Europe after the invasion of Normandy. So the only time we saw each other was when I would come back to London on leave or something like that. And we got engaged, semi-engaged. Both of us were a little bit worried because it was wartime and we thought, "Is this crazy and do we really know each other that well?" Well, the way you would worry in wartime.

And in 1945, he came back to Washington and, I think - I can't remember exactly the circumstances - he was asked to stay in the State Department. He could have gone back to his law practice in New York. But he was asked to stay on in the Foreign Service Reserve and at that time became head of the commercial policy section of the Department. And at that time they were terribly busy and, as you know, the United States had taken on a totally new role at that time as - well people call it "the leader of the Free World." We were the one country that was undamaged by the war. We were the country that had the money. We were the country that could provide the leadership for the rest of the world to come out of the war and the wartime troubles.

There were many men who had wonderful far-ranging ideas. Amongst them were people who had been thinking what we should do is lead the effort to free trade and tariffs and make circumstances better for exchange of goods between countries. And that problem was put to his division in the department and he testified on the Hill. Well, we were married in 1946, and had no honeymoon whatsoever, no break or anything. We came directly to Washington and he was testifying on the Hill before the Senate everyday for hours on what the United States proposed to do about lowering tariffs to promote trade and trying to get the nations of the whole world to agree to that. We will do this if you will do that. You know, one great big bargaining session which was to take place in Geneva, what was called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Those were wonderful days because President Harry Truman was simply marvelous. He backed the State Department completely on it. He said, "You go right ahead and do this. I think this is right to do and I'll take the political heat. I don't care what people say about it. This is the right thing to do. You go and do it."

So my husband, with Mr. William Clayton who was under secretary for economic affairs at that time, went to Geneva with a number of other men from the State Department who were very bright and who had been dreaming and thinking about this for years, who had been here in the United States during the war thinking about all the things we must do after the war. And the simple fact was that my husband sort of became the spokesman for these people. He was not an economist. But they briefed him so that he was the one who went before the senate committee and pled the case and then went to Geneva and negotiated the treaty having been told all the facts. They said, "Now you go and do it and get it done."

Well, we were just married of course and we went there. I was told that the meeting would last about six weeks. All the countries of the whole world came or sent representatives. Except the Russians wouldn't accept and the Japanese wouldn't come at first as I remember, although the Japanese are members now. And we were to be there "six weeks" and we stayed eight months. And then came back, having got the preliminary treaty signed with a certain amount of success, not total success, but a great step forward. We came back and settled down into what we thought would be just a normal life here in Washington working in the State Department. I can't remember who then would have been Win's boss, but somebody came to him one day and said, "We'd like you to go to London as economic counselor at the embassy there. We think the job needs you." I won't go into personalities. "But you're needed there to straighten some things out." Q: Was he still in the Foreign Service Reserve at that point?

BROWN: Yes. And he said, "For how long?" And they said, "Oh just a stopgap kind of period to straighten things out because a permanent man will be coming later on. You'd be there about eighteen months."

Q: And that was 19?

BROWN: That was 1952 and we had two children by then. And I was thrilled at the idea.

Q: You had been there before. You worked there before for the Red Cross.

BROWN: Oh yes, of course. And we had many, many friends in England and loved London, loved England. I was thrilled to be going back there and to get out of the housewife's rut that I was in here. So I said, "Yes, yes, tell him we'll go tomorrow." And we did, taking practically nothing with us except some clothes and things, thinking we were only there for eighteen months and would be coming back very soon. Well time went on and on and on and they kept saying, "Stay on, stay on."

And it was a terribly hard time to find a place to live in London because it was just before the coronation. First of all there had been so much bomb damage that a great many houses were not available or usable and everybody and his brother were coming from all over the world to the coronation. I wanted a house with a short lease and they said, "No, they're all taken up." Well there was an embassy house we could have had but it was quite a mansion. It's still there. I think it's still an embassy house. Number 10 Chester Square with four flights of stairs, a basement kitchen, all kinds of things that for an American seemed impossible. You know you'd have to either kill yourself or you'd have to have a staff of four or five people. And with two little children, you can imagine going from a basement kitchen to a nursery on the fourth floor. It just was too much.

So I kept trying and therefore we had several moves until finally an embassy house came vacant that was just exactly right. The right size, manageable, everything. And by that time I was a lot more familiar, knew the ropes more. How to get a maid, how to get a cleaning woman, how to get somebody to help you with children and so on. Because social life was very, very demanding on you, probably still is. Certainly more than any other post I've ever known.

Q: Every country is represented there.

BROWN: Oh yes, and much more formal, more precise. You had to be absolutely on time, to be dressed very properly. It was quite something as a first assignment.

Q: I'm kind of curious about why it was the Foreign Service Reserve when your husband came in because it sounds like what a regular Foreign Service officer would be doing.

BROWN: Somewhere in that period he became the regular economic counselor.

Q: Okay. So he became a civil servant at that point.

BROWN: Well I don't know. But he was still Foreign Service Reserve. But they said, "All right, forget about somebody taking your place. You just keep on doing the job."

Q: Yes, I noticed that he had a career designation as Civil Service GS-16 in 1950. That was sort of curious to me because he was at that time director of office of international trade policy or something like that?

BROWN: In the Department?

Q: In the Department I thought.

BROWN: I thought it was always the commercial policy division. You could be right.

Q: I don't know. But at the same time he remained in the Foreign Service Reserve.

BROWN: That's right. And then became economic counselor. That was his title. He was economic counselor when we first went over, but it was understood to be a very temporary assignment, but somewhere along the line they said, "Okay, consider it permanent. You're not going to go home in eighteen months, in other words. You're going to be here for two years, maybe, or three years." So that was perfectly all right. We were in a house, very comfortable, that we enjoyed and loved and had renewed friendships with so many English friends and were quite settled in. I think, frankly, we didn't even think of the future, what would happen.

Then came - and I don't know what year this happened. Would it be - you know more than I - perhaps '53 or '54 - what they call Wristonization. The plan put forward by Mr. Wriston. What's Mr. Wriston's first name? Henry or something?

Q: You know I don't know, but I did interview another person, Mary Louise Weiss, whose husband came into the Foreign Service as a Wristonee. In fact, I think that Mary Louise mentioned that your husband was her husband's boss at some point.

BROWN: That's right.

Q: He is an economist and he works in the international trade office.

BROWN: They're terribly nice and he was in Geneva during all the GATT negotiations and she had to stay at home because of her little children so they were separated for quite a long time.

Q: So in '52 when you went to London, Ambassador Brown was a Foreign Service Reserve and then later on in '56, he had a designation as O-1 officer. That must have been the Wristonization that you were talking about.

BROWN: I guess so. Of course all those numbers never meant anything to me. You know the GS something or other. I mean he would tell me, but it would go in one ear and out the other. It wouldn't register with me. I never have got all the Civil Service numbers straight in my head. I'm straight in my head about titles.

Q: Maybe you could tell me a little bit about the Wristonization. That would be interesting. What was that?

BROWN: Well, he came home one day and talked about it. Of course I knew it was going on and we would talk about it, but at one particular time, I suppose, he said, "You know, we've got to make a decision. Because from now on it's going to be a rule in the Department that everyone must serve abroad. There will be no Foreign Service Reserve. You won't have a choice anymore. You either go abroad or leave the Department." Everybody in the Department, was my understanding, must be willing to serve abroad, and he said, "Well how would you feel about that?" And I said, "Well I wouldn't mind that at all." We were of course in what to me was the most interesting post that could be, London, which we loved, and all of England and we did a great deal, when we could, of travel on the Continent and everything. The Foreign Service to me was this wonderful place to live. And looking back on it I guess I didn't think through that there could be lots of posts that would be pretty dreadful.

Q: So the news came when you were in England?

BROWN: Yes. So he agreed cheerfully and willingly. How much of this is going to be on the record?

Q: You will have a chance to look through the transcript and delete whatever you don't want to have.

BROWN: Well I want to be frank about it because as what is called a "Wristonee", many of our friends in the embassy couldn't have been nicer with congratulations. The people that Win worked with said, "This is the best thing that could have happened to the Foreign Service and it's just great to have you," and so forth and so on. But there were others who said, "Well, now they're scraping the barrel to get people in." There were some people who were very resentful.

Q: You're referring to Foreign Service officers?

BROWN: Yes. I don't remember their names. I was told them at the time, but they weren't really friends. All our real friends were warm and generous and welcoming and so on. But to a lot of people, and I can understand it, who started out in the Foreign Service as young people and worked their way up through years of dreadful posts as junior officers and coming up, there came my husband who came in at a senior position from the side. What would you call it?

Q: Lateral entry?

BROWN: Yes, in a senior position as economic counselor, never having had to struggle with this in some god-forsaken place for two years here and two years there and so on. Go up the ladder that way as my son-in-law is doing now. And they were resentful of it. And I can understand that completely.

Q: In other words, the Wristonization program was targeting the mid-level or higher officers?

BROWN: Well I don't know to tell you the truth. Probably.

Q: That's what it sounds like. They'd bring in somebody like your husband who already was holding a fairly high and important position.

BROWN: And saying, "You can't just come and dabble in a foreign post for two or three years and then say, 'Now I want to go home.' If you're going to take a post abroad with responsibility, then you've got to say, yes, you'd go on to another post whether you want to or not."

Q: So at that point the Foreign Service Reserve pretty much disappeared?

BROWN: I guess so. I don't hear of it anymore.

Q: I wonder what the rationale was for that Foreign Service Reserve. It was probably something like maybe people who were holding positions in international offices were in that position.

BROWN: Perhaps so. Something like that. I really don't know.

Q: Interesting. Were there other people who didn't want to go into the Foreign Service under this Wriston program?

BROWN: Well, some people didn't. And they said, "No." I know of at least two people who said, "No, we don't want to live that kind of life," and elected to stay here in Washington. The only two I know of - this is terrible - I'm not going to tell you their names - but they were so capable and so good that they could. . . . I think the Department just sort of overlooked it or just swept it under the rug and said, "Well all right." And kept on having them do their very important jobs and never asked them to go overseas. It was just one of those things. They made an exception of certain people because they were so good they didn't force them to go abroad.

Q: Why do you think the program was necessary?

BROWN: I don't know. I think it was because maybe Mr. Wriston thought the Department wasn't getting full value out of all the people who worked for it. That they should be willy-nilly. It would be like being a Marine or an Army officer and saying, "Yes I'll serve as long as we're in this country, but I don't want to ever go overseas." You see?

Q: I thought there was also some problem for actually the Foreign Service officers coming back into the State Department and having difficulty finding better jobs because these were held by somebody like your husband who. . . .

BROWN: I don't know. I really don't. I wouldn't venture an opinion.

Q: Very interesting. And that was obviously when there was a rapid expansion after World War II in the State Department.

BROWN: Yes, which expanded then enormously as you've known.

Q: I don't think you would have any idea of how many people went through that Wriston program?

BROWN: I don't have any idea.

Q: Once you were in, then?

BROWN: Life kept on just the same. There wasn't any noticeable difference as far as I could see.

Q: You were already in London obviously.

BROWN: We were in London. My husband kept on doing his job. And as a matter of fact was promoted because he had been the economic counselor and the economic minister. London is a huge post and very important. There's a political minister and an economic minister. The economic minister at our time was a man named Lincoln Gordon and he was nominally my husband's boss, and Winthrop Aldrich was ambassador, boss of everybody. During the time we were in London, they kept having GATT meetings in Geneva. The Department would ask for my husband to come over to Geneva and conduct negotiations. Same old story all over again. It was not a terribly happy time for me because he was gone so much, either here in Washington or in Geneva. In fact I had a baby, I had my third child while he was in Geneva.

Q: That must have been hard.

BROWN: It wasn't much fun. And Mr. Aldrich at a reception at the embassy one night - I'll never forget it. He was a very kindly, grandfatherly sort of person and they had asked me. I don't know what the reception was about. It doesn't matter. They gave maybe two a week or something. He came up to me and said, "Come in the library. I want to talk to you." And we went into the library. And Win had been in Geneva then I think maybe a month, two months. And he said, "I am totally fed up with this system where they take Win away whenever they want him. He belongs here in the embassy. He's my economic minister and I need him. And I just want to tell you that I'm sending a message to the State Department saying that he has to come back to the embassy and not be pulled away all the time for special assignments. He has a big job to do here." So I wanted to throw my arms around him. (laughter) Of course I just said, "Thank you very much. That would be wonderful." And so gradually it happened.

And so when Lincoln Gordon left - I think he later became ambassador to Argentina - I'm not sure if he went directly to Argentina or what happened to him - and they - whoever they is, the Department I guess - said, "Okay, you're economic minister now." And so that's how we finished our tour in England, as economic minister.

Q: And then you moved on to New Delhi?

BROWN: Then moved to New Delhi.

Q: Was he in the economic ... ?

BROWN: No, from then on he sort of went into the political side of it and he went as deputy chief of mission to India.

Q: Oh. Well what was that like for you in India then?

BROWN: Under Ellsworth Bunker. Well I still had my illusions about the Foreign Service, I must say. That ended any idea that all posts would be as nice as London because we arrived in mid-July, probably the worst time of the year, monsoon season where it's terribly hot and humid. Rather like Washington on its worse days.

Q: Probably worse.

BROWN: I thought we just couldn't make it. Well it was a cultural shock. It took quite a little time to get used to.

Q: I remember Mary Louise said - she also served in India. I don't know if it was the same time that you were there.

BROWN: No, no.

Q: And she said it was very colorful but it took a little getting used to.

BROWN: Well I think it's the way many foreigners must feel when they come to the United States. It's a terrible cultural shock to come to this country.

Q: Well different!

BROWN: But there it's not only the climate, the heat, but all the things you see, you know, the poverty, the smells. Time takes care of it.

Q: You were there from '57 to '60?

BROWN: Three years. That's right.

Q: And what was Ambassador Brown's job like as deputy chief of mission? How did that affect your role?

BROWN: We were blessed with this wonderful, wonderful ambassador, Mr. Bunker and his wife who - they're both dead now - were two of the finest people I've ever known. And he said to Win when we first came, "I want you to travel as much as you possibly can. Feel free to go all over India. It'd be a big help to me in fact if I could stay here and I'll mind the shop and you go and make speeches, travel everywhere, do everything." Obviously he would go when the big occasions were coming up, but he urged Win to get around the country.

So I think we saw every single part of India. We would take a plane and go to Madras, for instance and stay with the consul general there and then the consul general and his wife would take a couple of consulate cars and we'd go and we'd travel all over. You know, it's a huge country. We'd travel all over his district, making speeches to Rotary clubs and universities and everything. The trips were quite arduous, but at the same time we saw all the temples and famous places. The mosques and on and on all over the country. It was a great education.

Q: And you took the children along?

BROWN: Oh no. In the first place it wasn't practical and by then they were in school. They had a little international school there. Except for the youngest child, and I had a very good ayah for her. And the two older children were in school. And in India you have to be terribly careful, not only in your daily life but particularly when traveling, of health problems.

Q: Like water and food?

BROWN: Oh, water and food and what you eat and what you don't eat. You have to be awfully careful. Almost every weekend that we were home, we'd go out in the countryside with the children and have a picnic, go someplace with food from the house. I got hepatitis in India.

Q: Oh did you really? It's pretty common in that part of the world.

BROWN: I think every tenth person in the embassy got hepatitis, but I got a terrible case. I think some of my inner problems are due to hepatitis or liver damage or something.

Q: That's too bad. That's one of the things that we are very worried about. Well not very, but certainly something that we should be careful about.

BROWN: Be very careful. Don't take chances.

Q: Did your children have any big problems when they were in India?

BROWN: No, not really big problems. No more than ordinary childhood things except that Anne, the youngest child, developed boils, terrible boils. Do you have children?

Q: No, not yet.

BROWN: Boils. Poor little thing. What they came from and why I have no idea because goodness knows I insisted on cleanliness and all kinds of things. She had for a year a series of boils. It still sticks in my mind. They were so painful and she suffered from them so much. But they had nothing else really. The boils returned in Bangkok, though not so severely.

Q: And leaving them behind when you went traveling was probably a little hard sometimes.

BROWN: Sure. Well we were never gone more than a week, or ten days.

Q: Did you travel with other officers from the embassy as well?

BROWN: No, we'd go, just the two of us, but it was always with a stated schedule to meet important people in Bombay, we'll say, or make a speech at an important place. It was all planned out weeks in advance. It wasn't just traveling around and looking at the scenery.

Q: Do you remember any of those people that you met in those days?

BROWN: Indians?

Q: Yes. Well, you know like people that maybe had business with your husband with the State or other people.

BROWN: I can remember lots of funny incidents. I won't bore you by talking about them. Indians are very fond of speeches and we'd arrive at a town and after a long, long dusty hot drive, we'd be hustled into the guest house or wherever we were to stay and told, "You are expected in ten minutes at the home of the president of the university for dinner," and we would go. There was scarcely time to take a bath. Some places didn't have a bath. You just had to throw water on yourself and do your best to change clothes and be there and then go through much politeness. No such thing as a calm, quiet drink or rest before dinner, none of that kind of thing.

Q: Not like London.

BROWN: Rushed to the table, seated at a long table and then an Indian dinner. I had a hard time with Indian food because very early on I had a bad attack of dysentery from, I'm quite sure, something I'd eaten at an Indian dinner the night before. And therefore every time just the smell of curry or whatnot and I'd have to be terribly careful. I'd eat the rice and sort of pick at other things and push the food around on the plate and whatnot. Indians are very sensitive and they'd say, "Oh you don't like our food, do you?" And I'd say, "Oh yes, I do."

Senator Moynihan said something a couple of years ago in an interview that amused me very much. He was asked if he ever had dysentery in India. You know he was ambassador there for two or three years, after our time. And he said, "Only once, but it lasted three years!" (laughter) Which is exactly my story.

Q: I think I might have heard of that.

BROWN: The person I remember as one of the most interesting persons that we met in India was a man named Kushwant Singh who was a writer and editor and wonderful conversationalist. It was a real privilege to spend an evening with him and talk to him. And of course everybody who was in India then wanted to meet Nehru which we did several times. Well not several times. My husband many times and I very often at National Day celebrations and very often when Ambassador and Mrs. Bunker might have been out of the country, then we were standing in for them you see at receptions or whatnot. Public dinners.

Then I remember dozens of very ordinary conversations and meetings with local officials whose names I can't remember now. One terribly interesting evening with the leading manufacturing family of India, the Tata family. I think they're the wealthiest family in India.

And then another visit to a dam and that is the most interesting thing in the world to see in India. To see them building a dam because it's all done by hand. And there were Indian women walking with stones in baskets on their heads up a steep incline like ants. We saw several dams being built. My husband was always very interested in the progress, great progress being made by all these things. We visited one dam where the chief engineer was an American whom the Indians had hired to come over and build their dam. Very interesting. He explained how you put up the cement blocks and then you do a great deal of grouting. That's where I learned that word. Grouting the cement in-between the stones and so on. And then we had lunch at his house with him and I said, "I can't get over this. This tastes like totally American food." And he said, "That's just what it is. I refuse to eat Indian food and every single thing I eat comes out of a can and I order it from America." So we had canned luncheon meat, canned bread, canned peaches for dessert, canned everything. I'll never forget it.

Q: This was the gentleman who came .. ?

BROWN: This was an American. I can't remember his name, but he was building a huge dam for the Indians. There were a lot of minor episodes I won't go into. (End of Tape)

Q: Mrs. Brown, we were talking about India and I was hoping maybe you could talk a little bit more about the post as the wife of a DCM in India. You've mentioned that you traveled a lot. What about just within the embassy as the DCM's wife?

BROWN: Well, I saw my particular job as simply being helpful in any way I could be to Mrs. Bunker, the ambassador's wife. I had a very nice talk with her when we first arrived, that how happy I would be to do anything I could to help her or spare her. It's a difficult life there in that the heat is trying. I don't know how old she was. She was certainly older than I and I thought that she certainly needed help at certain times. She was a lovely person and very appreciative and I think I was helpful to her in going and doing certain things. It was easier for me to do them, shall I say, than for her.

And then as far as I was concerned, I did nothing that any other embassy wife would do other than trying to get to know all the other wives and be friends with the other wives, be helpful wherever possible or needful. I did several volunteer jobs because I wanted to in the first place, and in the second place, I wanted to set an example to other wives. Not to just sit at home and stay out of the heat. And because you see for the first time many of them had servants who had never had servants before in their lives. And it gave them plenty of free time to do things. Do volunteer work.

Q: I see. So you felt that your relationship with both the ambassador's wife and also the younger wives was pretty good and you might be acting actually as a mediator?

BROWN: That's right.

Q: And then you went on to Laos?

BROWN: That's right. We were in India for three years from '57 to '60. And in 1960, President Kennedy was elected and appointed my husband ambassador to Laos.

Q: And what was that like? Now you have moved up to ambassador's wife.

BROWN: Yes. It was a very trying situation for me in that he was called home on consultation after his appointment and I had to stay there with the children and was desperately in need of new clothes, having worn the same old cotton dresses for the last three years and we were going to still another hot climate. And I couldn't leave the children and he said, "Don't you worry. I'll do the shopping for you."

Q: Where was he going to do that?

BROWN: He was going to do it here in Washington. I told him more or less what I wanted and needed and he was here, I think, six weeks.

Q: That's quite a long time.

BROWN: Quite a long time. Well the situation was very dicey in East Asia at that time.

Q: This was the beginning of the war? Vietnam War?

BROWN: The very beginning of the real trouble. I guess it was the seed of the Vietnam War. And here he was, he had to learn about a whole new area, you see, that he'd never worked in before. And so he had a tremendous amount of briefing he had to go through from the CIA, and the Defense Department, the State Department, everything. So he finally came back and we left Delhi. By that time I had become quite fond of the place, to tell you the truth. That's the way. You make friends and everything is familiar and you understand everything and the household is running smoothly and everybody's crying because you're going and all that kind of thing. So it's inevitable. Even though I didn't like it at the beginning, when you finally leave, you're sad about it.

Q: That's good to know. It's encouraging to me!

BROWN: That's right. But if you'd ask me to go back and do it all over again, I'd say, "Thank you but no thank you." Once was enough. But I'm very glad that we did it. I feel sorry for people who have never lived in Asia or never lived in that part of the world. If they've only known Europe or South America, they don't really know how the world is the way I feel. Well, so we arrived in Laos in July again. (laughter) Arrived by way of Bangkok because you fly to Bangkok and then you have to take a little - I think we went up in the embassy plane to Vientiane, the capital.

Q: I've noticed that they've changed the name since then.

BROWN: Really?

Q: They still show it on the map on my big atlas, but in parenthesis. I'm trying to remember what the current name is. Because I had to look that up for Mary Louise's interview. She mentioned Vientiane also.

BROWN: Oh really? I didn't know they changed the name. It's like the new name for Burma. I can't remember those names.

Q: Myanmar? So in other words, the consultation happened just before you left India. Your husband came back to the States for ... ?

BROWN: He came here on consultation and then came back to India and picked us up and then we went on to Laos. Well Bangkok first for overnight, and then to Laos the next day. That was quite frankly something that took getting used to. A very small town, it's a very small country and once again I went through culture shock. A small residence for the ambassador which was desperately was in need of re-painting and re-decorating or something. All the rooms were dark and gloomy.

Q: Who was there before?

BROWN: A man named Horace Smith whom I don't know at all. I've only met him once. And his wife, his wife was there. I met her here, but honestly I wouldn't know her if I saw her. I met her long after we came back to the States.

Q: So here you are in Laos.

BROWN: Yes, and now an ambassador's wife.

Q: How did that feel?

BROWN: That didn't feel any different from anything else. I didn't feel any great charge or excitement or anything, I think chiefly because everything was on such a small scale. It was disappointing, if I could put it that way. If you're socially ambitious and wanted a glamorous diplomatic life, well forget it if you're going to go to Vientiane because it's not that way.

Q: It's a different world.

BROWN: A different world, but a huge American contingent there. A great big USOM (United States Operations Mission) Do you know what that is?

Q: No.

BROWN: U.S. AID mission.

Q: It's basically economic aid to the country.

BROWN: Economic aid, yes. It's like the AID mission.

Q: USAID is what you mean.

BROWN: USAID In a little primitive country like this, building bridges, putting a well in a village, all those very small - not everything very small - but just from the lowest level trying to improve the lives. We seemed to have an awful lot of people there doing it because all the dependents were there - wives and children. Then there was a huge MAAG contingent - military assistance. And their wives and their children. In fact I think there were more Americans there than there were Laotians for something that seemed to me just enormous. Because we hadn't had any of that stuff in India it seemed. Well, no, we had a big U.S. AID mission, but we didn't have military. In India, we didn't have the military period. In fact the embassy Marines weren't even allowed to wear their uniforms in India.

Q: Really? How interesting.

BROWN: They wore civilian clothes. Indians were non-aligned, you see. They wanted no evidence of U.S. military.

Q: An interesting point.

BROWN: So there we were in Laos and I started making all my official calls to the foreign ministers' wives. Oh, my French was practically non-existent and ever since we'd gotten news of this assignment, I'd been having French lessons every morning at 7:30 in New Delhi which was obviously not going to enable me to speak French, but was going to help me get started and keep me going because French is the language in Laos. Leftover by the French. So I started making my calls and being entertained. Almost every night there was a reception. The head of MAAG (military assistance group) and his wife, the head of USOM and his wife, all these things that you do at the beginning at a new post. And all just terribly confusing. New names, new everything. And terrible heat all the time. Constant heat.

And maybe only two weeks passed when the phone rang one night and it was the DCM whose name was John Holt calling to tell my husband that there was artillery fire near his house and what he said I think is happening is that a coup is taking place. And that proved to be true. A Laotian army captain named Kong Le wanted to overthrow the government. And so from then on, all social life ceased.

Q: That was how long after you arrived?

BROWN: About two weeks.

Q: Two weeks!

BROWN: The firing wasn't annihilating or anything like that. It was just sporadic and irritating and nobody knew really what was going to happen and how serious it was and so forth and so on. The Laotians are fierce fighters but they aren't very skilled and their aim was very bad.

Q: (laughs) It sounds funny, but I'm sure it was not.

BROWN: They weren't out to kill the Americans, but they could just simply aim the guns the wrong way and hit an American building, you see, and they later did almost destroy the American Embassy. So my husband got more and more worried about all these women and children you see, with the fighting going on all around the town. He didn't want to evacuate everyone because that would look like we were frightened, you see. What he wanted to do was play down this whole coup and say, "Oh this is just a minor skirmish. It's not really war, and it will all die away." Except it didn't die away. I think he was terrified that a dependent, a wife or a child, would be hit by a stray bullet and killed.

One great and fortunate thing happened which was that, being the rainy season once again, monsoon season, the river, the Mekong River, which runs between Thailand and Laos, began to rise because it poured rain incessantly and it rose and it rose and it rose and it came up the banks.

Q: It's a pretty big river.

BROWN: And, ha, the perfect solution. It was announced that the city of Vientiane was in danger of being flooded so therefore the dependents were being evacuated because of the flood. So we were all evacuated to Bangkok with the idea that once either the flood was over or the river had gone down and the fighting had ceased, peace had been made between Kong Le and the Laotian government with their three or four princes, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince General Phoumi Nosavan - a can of worms. I wouldn't even begin to go into it. Once peace had been made we would all come back. Well, it wasn't made. And it dragged on and on and on. So I lived in Bangkok for two years with the children.

Q: Did you really?

BROWN: Yes. With all the other wives.

Q: That's amazing. Just waiting?

BROWN: Waiting. At first we thought, well surely we'll come back. We lived in hotels and time passed and no, it wasn't safe to come back, no, no. Well I didn't see my husband for three months. He didn't get down to Bangkok for three months.

Q: When you first were evacuated?

BROWN: Yes. And then it became obvious that we weren't going to go back at all. First I got an apartment which was kind of grungy. Not ambassadorial at all!

Q: It's worse now, Bangkok.

BROWN: Is it?

Q: Yes. I was there last year. Pretty bad.

BROWN: Really? For the poor Bangkok embassy we were like "The Man Who Came to Dinner," you know, and then just never left. They didn't know what to do with us after a while. Well in fact, sort of ignored us.

Q: Who was in charge of the post in Bangkok?

BROWN: Well Alex Johnson was ambassador there, but we weren't his responsibility. We were the U.S. government, you know. He had his own problems without looking after us. So then just by the process of attrition, their tour being up, people began going home, so there were fewer and fewer wives left in Bangkok, although still quite a number. I was the "mother" waiting in the hospital corridor for at least three children to be born. You know, young wives whose husbands were up in Laos or something like that. I did my best to kind of keep some kind of . . . Although I scarcely knew any of them. And they didn't know me. I'd only been there for two weeks. I remember the day we were evacuated, the embassy clerk or whoever she was said, "What did you say your name was?" I said, "Brown." She said, "How do you spell it?" "BROWN." And she said, "And what does your husband do?" Well you know, it was that way.

Q: This was in Laos or Bangkok?

BROWN: This was in Vientiane as we were being evacuated. It was all done very efficiently, awfully well done. She didn't mean anything. She just had never heard of me.

Q: You hadn't been there that long.

BROWN: No. After a year, by just the greatest stroke of luck, a couple - he wasn't in the embassy in Bangkok, but they were with the USAID mission, I think. They had a very nice house right there in that area that's sort of the embassy area. Ruam Rudie was the name of the street. A furnished house which they had been living in. I didn't know her at all well - I'd only met her once. But she was a very good friend of very good friends of mine in the Bangkok embassy. And she felt sorry for me. And she said her house was owned by a prince. I think they've got a lot of princes in Bangkok. And it wasn't grand or palatial, but it was extremely comfortable and pleasant. And she told him that she wanted him particularly to let the house to me. Not to let it to anybody else. Nobody even knew that the house was for rent except myself. And that's how I got the house and from then on life improved enormously because I had two air-conditioners!

Q: Oh, that's really important in Bangkok!

BROWN: In fact two air-conditioners, one for each of the bedrooms so the children had one. You know how terrible the mosquitos are there. And the house even came staffed with a houseboy and his wife. Who did the cooking or what, I don't know, but anyway I had a couple, and life became immeasurably better. And I said, "I'm just going to forget about going to Vientiane, I'm going to just concentrate on doing something to help everybody's morale," including my own. Well, much earlier than that with a couple of the other Laos wives we had got a school going for our children and got my husband to send down all the school books from Vientiane. Of course all the teachers were still there, they were all American wives. So we got a place and got a school going, a regular structured schedule.

Q: Good idea.

BROWN: Oh yes. It was the best thing that we could have done. And since now finally I had a place to do it, I went to a couple of the local hospitals and explained my situation and said, here we were, a group of women and I thought it would be a very good thing if we all had some kind of work to do on a regular basis. And if possible, because we had no transportation, nobody had a car you see, we could do it at my house. They could get together in pedicabs or cabs or something and come to my house once a week. You know how houses in Bangkok have the ground floor which is open to the air. What's that called, I've forgotten.

Q: I don't know if they have a special name, in Thai I'm sure. Sort of like a courtyard.

BROWN: Yes, roof and whatnot and furniture on it. No walls. And one hospital said, "Well that would be just wonderful!" They gave us bolts of muslin, unbleached muslin. I can still see those bolts of material. I can't sew, but one of the other wives said, "Sure, let me do it." They lent us a sewing machine and they took turns on the sewing machine and we met once a week and we made sheets, I guess, for the hospital. And the hospital would come and pick them up every week and deliver the supplies.

And it turned out to be very nice. We had ice tea and cookies and everybody got to see each other once a week and we kept up. You know, who is sick, who is well, who is very depressed, who needs cheering up. They were a great group of women. I was terribly proud of them. There was no alcoholism, no whining, no anything. Maybe if there was, they kept it to themselves. I would not have same women every week, but everybody knew the day and they were free to come if they wanted to come. Twenty, thirty people maybe, something like that.

Q: How many were there in total?

BROWN: Oh quite a number at the very beginning. Total number of dependents. I would hate to hazard a guess. I would say roughly maybe 200.

Q: Wow, that's quite a large number to be evacuated.

BROWN: From a little town like that.

Q: How did the children manage throughout this?

BROWN: The children were very good. Of course women, American women - I beg your pardon - but all women are quite resourceful when something like this happens. The ones with very small children got together and had a little play school. You know, took turns having all the children to play. And as I said with the older children, we started the school for them.

Q: You built your own support group yourselves.

BROWN: That's right. We just did it. And it was as much for all of us. Kept us busy, kept us occupied.

Q: I don't suppose there was training for this before you went to Laos?

BROWN: No. I didn't expect any. I frankly hated that whole time in Bangkok. I really did because I was there with no purpose in life.

Q: Much different from the usual diplomatic life that you were used to.

BROWN: And no diplomatic colony or anything. Quite a switch from London.

Q: And I guess also the uncertainty added to the anguish.

BROWN: Yes.

Q: So in the end you just stayed on until?

BROWN: Until '62. Until a new ambassador was appointed. I think it certainly was high time because I think my husband probably aged ten years in that time. It was terribly hard on him. A lot of sixteen, eighteen hour days and cables back and forth. Would there be war, wouldn't there? And Kennedy took an intense interest in it. And Governor Harriman was assistant secretary for far east affairs, and of course he and Win were old friends from London days. He came over two or three times. It was very much of a hot topic in Washington at the time.

Q: I'm sure.

BROWN: What was the best stance to take? To send in American troops or not. And my husband was strongly, strongly opposed to doing that.

Q: Was he?

BROWN: Oh yes. To American intervention. He said, "Let us do everything possible to get the parties right here to sit down and negotiate, but don't send in troops and don't. . . . Of course other people, I don't know for sure, but I imagine the military people said, "Gung ho. Let's go in there." Just the way Vietnam started. Send in advisors and then send in troops and then so and so on and you know how that escalated.

Q: That's tough. I guess Ambassador Brown didn't have any idea at all what he was getting into when he got assigned.

BROWN: He knew from what he had been told here that there might be. I mean the trouble was brewing under the surface. There could be trouble at some point. But I don't think he had any idea that it would be as bad. At one point the MAAG chief burst into his office and said, "Get the hell out of here. Right now!" And Win said, "Why? What's the problem?" He said, "Don't talk. Get out, get out." And two minutes later his office was hit by a shell and his desk destroyed and everything. He would have been killed. It was a very strange period. Finally they sent out everybody. They sent the secretaries and spent hours burning papers, embassy papers. You know all the mechanics of getting ready to abandon an embassy.

Q: So that would have been '62. But the new ambassador was assigned, you said?

BROWN: Well the new ambassador didn't come until we left and who was he? I'll tell you who he was. Leonard Unger who had been DCM in Bangkok. And they were wonderfully kind to me all the time we were there.

Q: And then they had been there in that area.

BROWN: Oh yes. He later became ambassador to Taiwan.

Q: So we have just finished with Laos and we're moving on to '62 to '64. And you returned to the States. Ambassador Brown went to the National War College?

BROWN: That's right. He was the deputy commandant representing the State Department at the War College.

Q: What exactly does that mean?

BROWN: There's a deputy commandant for the Navy and the Army and the Air Force and the State Department. And they all either teach courses or they supervise courses or they bring in speakers for the students who are at the War College. And one lives at Ft. McNair, so that's where we lived for two years. That's Southwest Washington. Down near the. . . .

Q: Navy Yard?

BROWN: Not that far. Well you go past the Arena Theater. It's very close to that.

Q: So now you're back from a terrible experience in Laos and Bangkok.

BROWN: In a funny way back in Washington, but not of Washington. Not living in town, living on a military post in town, but not what you call a normal Washington life because our whole purpose of the War College is not only to train the best and the brightest as they like to think of themselves, upcoming young officers, but to have them get to know each other. The different services. Learn to know each other and each other's problems. Become friends because it is expected that the CIA man and the Navy man might possibly serve together in a future post. Well great. Here they've had that two years together at the War College and have become friends. It's to break down barriers in the services.

Q: So they can work together better in the future.

BROWN: Work together and understand each other better and understand each other's problems and so on.

Q: Did your husband teach any courses there?

BROWN: You know I can't remember exactly. He gave talks on things that he was a specialist in and things he knew about. One of the chief things he did was to get speakers from the State Department. An ambassador who was back here on consultation who was involved in some current very interesting problem. He'd have him come and talk and so forth.

Q: Well his whole experience in Laos would have been very, very interesting.

BROWN: It was, I'm sure it was.

Q: Well, what were you doing?

BROWN: Well I was replenishing my wardrobe for one thing. (laughter) And keeping house, quite frankly, because I didn't have much household help. I had a woman who sometimes came and sometimes didn't. This is something that - here I'm talking. I'm not complaining, I'm not criticizing. The military have a great advantage over civilians in the service in that everyone wanted those. . . . Have you ever seen those houses at Ft. McNair? It's called the "General's Row."

Q: No.

BROWN: They're lovely old houses with white pillars. It's like Ft. Myer. They're red brick with big white pillars and they're very handsome, very dignified. And every military wife has an aide or two assigned to do housework, cooking, cleaning, etc., etc.

Q: Not bad.

BROWN: But not the State Department. And of course we entertained. What we were there for was to get to know the military ourselves at our level. So we entertained quite a good deal. So somebody had to produce it. That was I did a great deal of the time. I always had to do it properly of course and get somebody to wait table and all that kind of thing. Win would have, as I told you, a speaker come from the Department, particularly somebody who was newsworthy or somebody who was right up to the minute on some particular problem to talk to the students. And then bring him and about ten of the students back to the house for lunch. And the students just all loved that because it was a change from the cafeteria. And they would have a martini or two I guess. Anyway, the bar was there, they could have whatever they wanted and sit down and eat lunch. This would be eight or ten of the young officers plus the speaker of the day and my husband. And I did the lunch. I did not serve it, I did not appear. It was served buffet style. I cooked it. Well it kept me kind of busy.

Q: Especially when you were used to having some help in India and also in Vientiane. In Bangkok you had a little help also.

BROWN: I was back down to earth.

Q: Was it a good time for you though?

BROWN: It was. It's a lovely place to live down there. It's very quiet. Of course the three children were in school and that helps a lot. Taking care of them.

Q: At that time did the children say much about their experiences overseas? Did they talk much about that?

BROWN: No, I think the biggest thrill of their whole lives occurred when they got back to Washington and they saw a TV for the first time in their lives.

Q: Really? How old were they?

BROWN: Well my son was about fourteen and the next daughter would have been about twelve and the youngest was ten, maybe, nine. They'd never seen TV before. I think that hit them more than anything. Plus all the goodies that you have to eat and drink in the United States which we certainly didn't have in Bangkok. I remember we stopped in Hawaii on our way back and I think I ate a head of lettuce everyday. I hadn't had any lettuce for four years. You see I'd been out of the country for four years. Just stupid things like that were just marvelous.

Q: Peanut M & M's?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: And the children didn't have any trouble integrating into the schools there?

BROWN: No.

Q: Sometimes I've heard that when they try to explain their experiences to their peers, they have a little trouble because they didn't share the same experiences.

BROWN: That's right. Well if the children did, they never told me about it.

Q: And in London they were too young to be going to school.

BROWN: Well they went to pre-school. And in India they were going to the International School. And in Laos they obviously weren't doing much for two weeks and then they had your school in Bangkok.

Q: October 25, 1992. This is Monique Wong and I'm interviewing Mrs. Peggy Ann Brown at her home for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History. This is Tape II, Side A. So here we are. We're at the end of 1964, I guess and you're getting ready to go to Seoul as an ambassador's wife.

BROWN: That's right. To tell you the truth that was something of a disappointment, to me anyway. While we were at Ft. McNair, we decided to spend our leisure time house hunting. While we were in London, we had sold the house we had lived in in Washington. And we spent I can't tell you how many weeks and months looking at houses until the real estate agent must have been ready to kill us by the time we had traipsed in and out of all the different houses. But I knew exactly what I wanted and was willing to just keep on looking until we found it. I wanted a house in town close by a bus stop for the children to use the bus and for a cleaning woman to come by bus. I did not want Georgetown. I didn't want this, that or the other thing.

But anyway, we looked and looked and we finally found a house on Tracy Place which was exactly perfect for our needs. It had the right number of bedrooms, right size. We had this funny old-fashioned furniture which required fairly big rooms to put it in. All of which had been in storage for - well, all these years. So we bought it. And then because - I'm trying to think which came first - whether we rented it. No, we didn't. We bought it and then Win was told that he was appointed ambassador to Korea. So what to do with the house? We couldn't move into it. After so long I was just desperately anxious to have one place we could call home, so when the children said, "Where's home?" I could say, "Home is Washington and this is the house that we will live in."

So then in great haste, we had to rent the house before we left for Korea and rented it to a terribly nice family. He was an assistant secretary in the Commerce Department. They came from New York and they wanted the house on one condition, that we put the carpets down and the draperies and washing machine, dryer, so on and so forth, terrace furniture. It had a nice terrace in the back. It's just over here about two blocks. Which makes sense. He knew that he wasn't going to be there forever. He was only going to be there for maybe two years. You wouldn't want to have draperies made or buy rugs for a house or something. So it made sense to us so we said, "Lord, okay, let's go and buy rugs for the house and all these other things." And I had, while we were in India, bought Indian raw silk for a non-existent house. Once we were on a trip in some part of India and went to a factory, a mill where raw silk was made and exported and dyed after it gets to this country. Or sent to somewhere. So I bought enough raw silk for an imaginary house, a living room, a dining room and I didn't know what else. So I had that made up.

Q: What color?

BROWN: If I'd had time I would have chosen a color more-or-less this color, but I didn't have time and I just had it made up as it was so it's just sort of a creamy beige color.

Q: The natural color for raw silk.

BROWN: And we went to Woodward and Lothrop and bought all the carpeting for the downstairs and some of the upstairs rooms and also in India, I bought - I spent a lot of time daydreaming while speeches were going on in some Indian dialect. I bought carpet, cotton rugs at another factory that we visited.

Q: The dhurries?

BROWN: Yes. And of course they were very cheap there. And I had some furniture made in India, copies of pieces that were in the house that the embassy had furnished. And I was furnishing an imaginary house. Three bedrooms for three children and so on. So anyway, it all got done and we left for Korea and had three wonderfully happy years there. People say it's the best kept secret in the Foreign Service what a great post it is. Well it certainly was in our day. It has a wonderful climate, wonderfully warm, cheerful, friendly people. A real delight to work with and live with.

Q: It gets cool in the winter though, doesn't it?

BROWN: It has a climate very much like Washington.

Q: Now did you get any sort of training? I remember you had some French before you went to Laos from India, but there was really nothing for an ambassador's wife.

BROWN: Well the Foreign Service Institute never said "boo" to me about it. I would have gone to classes or whatever, but nobody ever said to come.

Q: I know they have something for ambassadors' wives now.

BROWN: Well it's since my day. It didn't exist in my day. Well we studied Korean when we got there. We had lessons every morning.

Q: So now you actually have a proper embassy and you have a staff.

BROWN: A wonderful staff, and I give all thanks to my predecessor, Sam Berger and Margie Berger. I don't know if you ever heard of them. And he was very good and she was a very intelligent woman and whether it was she who trained the servants, I really don't know, but they were just absolutely first-class and we were terribly spoiled for three years with good help.

Q: It was very busy socially?

BROWN: Oh, terribly busy socially because of not only social life with the Koreans, but visitors from Washington constantly. Senators or Representatives. So many were coming to Japan, for instance, and so they came to Korea on the way or something. And then, once again, you had a huge military presence there and a great part of our job was living happily with all the military. The generals and the admirals.

Q: The attachés?

BROWN: No, we had in the embassy our own attachés. But the whole military complex there is just huge, you see. We have 40,000 troops there, don't we? Something like that.

Q: I don't know. A large number I'm sure.

BROWN: So we had generals and generals' wives and admirals and admirals' wives. There had to be an awful lot of socializing and. . .

Q: Keeping everybody happy?

BROWN: No, not particularly. They didn't need to be kept happy. But keeping good relations. Let's just put it that way. Not only good relations with the Koreans, but good relations with the Americans there because the whole military presence is so powerful and takes itself very seriously. And should be taken seriously. And they aren't always used to dealing with an embassy or an ambassador or something. Sometimes I imagine they're kind of suspicious.

Q: I guess they're the soldiers and you're the diplomats. Not quite the same.

BROWN: That's right, no. So you had that enormous segment. And so many of my Foreign Service wives are astounded when I mention USOM or MAAG or something. They say, "What on earth are you talking about?" You know they've lived in posts that didn't have anything like that. There was just a U.S. embassy, period. Nothing else. Except maybe USIA or something. But here again, we had this huge military presence. And then a huge AID mission, USOM, in Korea. I don't know how many wives, but very strong-minded wives and not about to be considered second-class citizens or anything like that. And they had to be kept happy as well.

Q: And that was part of your job as the ambassador's wife?

BROWN: Yes. To try to make everybody one big happy family.

Q: That's quite a big task.

BROWN: The military wives had a luncheon once a month at the officer's club and the USOM wives had a luncheon once a month at the USOM club. And then we had an embassy wives meeting once a month. I was chairman by tradition of the local children's hospital committee and had to get very much involved in that. I just can't tell you all. I had never been as busy in my life as I was then.

Q: And what about within the embassy? I guess as the wife of a new Foreign Service officer, I'm sort of interested from your perspective as the ambassador's wife looking now at the new people who were starting to come. Were they something that you were impressed with or unhappy with in particular?

BROWN: I know one thing. This harks back to Bangkok. There was a situation there where the ambassador's wife was quite arbitrary in her decisions. She would say to somebody, "I want you to be chairman of our YWCA booth at the bazaar this coming fall," and this wife would say, "Oh but please, I've just finished such and such a job. I feel I really just can't spare the time. Couldn't somebody else do it?" And she'd say, "No, I want you to do it." And she was also given to things like calling up wives on a Sunday afternoon and saying, "I want you to come over and play bridge," when they had other plans and they didn't want to play bridge, but they had to go and play bridge.

All that kind of thing I was very much aware of and I always thought that was the most terrible thing I ever heard of. So I was determined not to ever be that way, and in particular because there were a couple of younger wives in Korea who were studying. One was training to be a doctor. One was studying by correspondence, I think, I can't remember what. And I said to both of them, separately. I talked to them and I said, "What you are doing is more important than wives' affairs, coffee and tea parties and things like that. Don't feel you ever, ever have to drop something to come here." I felt very strongly about this. And I felt that way about evening parties, too. I didn't think that a wife ought to have to go to a cocktail party or a reception at the embassy simply because she and her husband had been invited, particularly if she had little children and was having a problem about being out too much and she felt the children needed her at home. Way back when I first got to London, when the children weren't even adjusted yet, I used to have to drop everything and go to someplace to a lunch leaving a crying child at home. I can still remember that and how much I hated it.

Well anyway, to make a long story short, I think that one thing - I didn't start it. This was an idea of a USIA officer's wife. It was her idea and she came and asked me if I would help with it. And I think it was one of the best things that happened in Korea. She wanted to get out what she called a little newsletter and hopefully rather like a magazine. It would be in English for all the hundreds of American women living in Seoul, the military and the USOM, plus the Korean women who had lived in the United States and spoke English who would love to have something like an American magazine. And this magazine would contain a garden article, an article on Korean recipes to be adapted to American taste, an article on Korean history making it interesting or a trip to someplace in Korea. And the whole thing to carry advertising which would make the magazine support itself. You would give the magazine away. The advertising would pay for the printing and whatnot and if there was any profit left over, the money would go to charity, Korean charity.

Well, last I heard, it's still going. And it was a great success. And one of the best parts about it was that so many women turned out to have so much talent. Here's all this untapped talent. Women who could write. There was a book review every month. Women who could do very amusing things. One woman was a born salesperson. She went out and sold advertising and had a wonderful time! To Korean hairdressers and brass makers and antique dealers and things like this. This gave everybody something to do. And the Korean women loved the magazine.

Q: So you weren't really that strict with the officers or their wives that they have to be doing a certain amount of entertaining or attending parties, that they could do other things.

BROWN: They could do their own thing. Anyway, I think it was a success. I never told anybody. Well I was told that I had to do certain things in London. I remember that vividly. I never ever did it myself, told anybody what to do.

Q: That's good to know. Do you think that's true with other ambassadors' wives?

BROWN: Gosh Monique, I've been away from it so long now and haven't traveled around in embassies, so I haven't really been able to observe what's going on these days. But my daughter has never complained about anything like that. She's been in two very small posts, so I don't really know.

Q: And she's married to a Foreign Service officer?

BROWN: Yes. I think maybe I could be accused I never heard anything about it, but of course you don't hear about things like that, but we had a presidential visit while we were in Seoul. President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson and an entourage. It was a trip he made where he went all around Asia. He went to New Zealand, Australia, he did the whole swing around the Pacific. Probably the Philippines first and so on. Did the whole swing around the Pacific and his last stop was Korea.

Of course at every president's visit, the host country entertains him at a dinner or a something. And then the President entertains the president of the country. He gives a party. Only he doesn't lift a finger. It's the poor old women in the embassy who put on the party. It was decided that the party would be at a great big place outside of Seoul, about as far as from here to Bethesda, at kind of a - not a resort, but a place that Koreans like to go to. It had a huge auditorium. It was a convention center sort of thing. Huge auditorium and a restaurant and all kinds of things attached to it. The party was given in the auditorium ballroom. I don't know if you call it a ballroom.

Q: Major event.

BROWN: And bare as a bone. Not very attractive, not very anything. So I had to start with somebody. I started with the senior wives. I said, "Okay, please help me. Let's all go out there. We've got to take this room and turn it into something that looks glamorous like a party room or something." And we did. We had two weeks to do it in. But the Koreans were just simply marvelous. They are wonderful people. They will knock themselves out to do something overnight for you. They have beautiful silks, you know, like Thai silk. And we had big round tables scattered around the room with gold silk cloths going down to the floor. I've got all the pictures of all that stuff. And in the middle of the table a tall brass, very high candlestick, you see, with a thick candle in the middle and flowers around the base. Against the wall, sofas and greenery and screens. You know, Koreans have thousands of screens that they're dying to sell. Antique dealers. Incidentally, many screens and much brass was sold to the Johnson group.

Q: Like these you have here.

BROWN: We put up the screens to hide these ugly bare walls. And then up on the receiving line, we lined the whole back of it with evergreen trees.

Q: Wow! What an effort.

BROWN: What an effort. I never will forget it. But all right, everybody worked like dogs. Maybe they resented it. I worked harder than anybody else.

Q: Well, you needed the help, though. I mean you couldn't have done it by yourself.

BROWN: So at times like that, you just say, "I'm sorry, girls, I need help." And if you can say, "Oh pooh, I don't want to help you." If they could say that to me, and I'd say, "Okay, don't bother. But you're kind of missing out on the fun if you don't do something." That's the thing, Monique. If you say, "I'm not going to take part in any embassy activity, I'm not going to the silly cocktail parties. I've got better things to do." Well all right, you're kind of cutting off your nose to spite your face because if you'd go to the cocktail party, you might meet some terribly interesting Greek, we'll say. Or make a new friend or something like that. You can figure you're helping yourself. You're not doing it just to make the ambassador happy.

Q: How would you feel, though, if the wife came to you and said, "Mrs. Brown, do you need any help with anything?" Would you feel positive or negative about that? You know sometimes you don't want to appear, you know.

BROWN: Well I think I'd say, "Thank you so much for even thinking of it. Of course there will be times where I'll need help. I'll let you know."

Q: Sometimes I feel that as a new person, they want to be a little bit careful about things like that. They don't want to appear to be trying to. . .

BROWN: I understand what you mean.

Q: . . . please the ambassador even though you'd really like to be doing something.

BROWN: It becomes pretty clear, Monique, what kind of a person you are in an embassy. If you're obviously cheerful and willing and friendly to the Greeks and can speak a little Greek, the ambassador is going to notice it, his wife is going to notice it. Don't worry, she will.

Q: No I'm not worried. I've heard other people mention this. That's why I pose the question. Then after Korea, you're back in the States for a number of years.

BROWN: That's right. I'm trying to think what my husband did then. He spent one year. . . Johnson asked him to be a representative to all the governors of the 50 states. Was that then or was that some other time?

Q: 1967?

BROWN: Well he did that for a year, but I can't remember when that was. Maybe that was right after Fort McNair. But he came back and worked with Marshall Green. He was deputy assistant secretary for Far East affairs and worked with Marshall Green and Bill Bundy. And then retired. By that time he knew he had Parkinson's and knew he had to retire. There was no question of another assignment abroad.

Q: You weren't going overseas anymore. Just one last thing. We kind of mentioned one of your children had married a Foreign Service officer. I am interested in hearing a little bit about their views on the Foreign Service, being children who had traveled so much.

BROWN: Well first of all they say they both very much enjoy meeting foreigners and making friends and so forth. That doesn't faze them no matter what country they're sent to. But on the other hand, Anne has told me that every now and then she gets so tired of the effort of making friends and she wishes that she were right here in the United States building friendships with people that she would see forever on a regular basis. But, I don't know. The trouble with the Foreign Service is there are so many invisible things you get from it. A kind "invisible salary" I've always called it. Kind of a plus just from living in a foreign country and knowing foreign people. And I've always frankly felt sorry for friends of whom I have many who have never spoken to a foreigner, practically, except on a trip to Europe. To the hotel man or the train conductor or something like that. And I think my life is much richer than theirs.

Q: What about your other two children? Do they ever mention wanting to go into the Foreign Service at all?

BROWN: Oh no. My son, the oldest, is a lawyer here in Washington.

Q: Following in his father's footsteps.

BROWN: He took the Foreign Service exam just to see if he could pass it and he did.

Q: Of course he did. (laughs)

BROWN: And then the oldest daughter, Julia, is married to an artist and they live in Arizona and travel back and forth to Ireland and Europe and everywhere else. I think all the children, if you asked them, would probably say they're very glad of their Foreign Service experience.

Q: I would have been.

BROWN: I don't know. I've never really asked them or talked to them about it.

Q: Well I think we have finally come to the end. . . .

BROWN: You've gotten to the bottom of the barrel, I think.

Q: Oh well, there are a lot more things that I would like to ask, actually. I could go on and on. Thank you very, very much. I really appreciate this opportunity to talk to you and learn from you. Your experiences and everything. It's also encouraging to hear the good things.

BROWN: There are good things and bad things and I think the good things outweigh the bad things.

Q: Good! Well shall we stop?

BROWN: All right, fine.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Winthrop G. Brown

Date entered Service: FS Reserve 1945 Left Service: 1972

Status: Widow of Career Ambassador

Date/place of birth: Fort Smith, Arkansas, Sept. 9, 1917

Maiden Name: Bell

Parents:

Mr. and Mrs. Arch L. Bell, businessman

Schools: St. Mary's Academy, Austin, Texas; University of Texas, 2 years; University of Missouri, 2 years, (B.J.)

Profession: Journalist, Advertising copywriter (Nieman-Marcus), Red Cross World War II (overseas)

Date/place of marriage: December 28, 1946; Austin, Texas

Children:

Winthrop Noyes Brown

Julia Brown Turrell

Anne Brown Rodgers

Positions held in Washington and at post: At Post: Too many volunteer positions to enumerate, no paid ones

In Washington: United Way, Board of International Students' House; many spot volunteer jobs

End of interview